

Massachusetts Commission on the Status of Women Springfield Public Hearing Report

*On June 5, 2000,
the Massachusetts Commission on the Status of Women
held its first public hearing in
Springfield, Massachusetts,
at the Meline Kasperian Professional Development Center.*

*The purpose of this hearing was to
listen to the concerns of
women and organizations in Western Massachusetts.*

*The Commission hopes that the
comments, feedback, and input of the participants
will help us focus on some of the most pressing concerns
facing women in our state.*

Who Attended

Commissioners

Minosca Alcántara
Beth Boland
Barbara Gomes-Beach
Clare Higgins
Mary Reardon Johnson
Roseanna Means
Susana Segat
Kateri Walsh

Staff

Priscilla Golding
Heidi Kruckenberg

Facilitator

Brenda Lopez

Elected Official

Senator Linda Melconian, Springfield

Participants from the Community

James Aranc, Massachusetts Prevention Center
Mary Lou Bouley, League of Women Voters of the Northampton Area
Tess Browne, Mass Action for Women Audit
Maryann K. Brunton, Massachusetts Commission Against Discrimination
Dianne Carter
Nancy Court, Springfield Mentoring Partnership
Patricia Crosby, Springfield Technical College
Sherry Duchesne, HAP, Inc.
Laurie Estes, Girl Scouts of Western Massachusetts
Julie Granof, Caucus of Women Legislators
Carla Halpern, Legal Assistance Corporation of Central Massachusetts
Kerry Homstead, YWCA of Western Massachusetts
Minerva Lopez, Spanish American Union, Inc.
Mary McRae, YWCA of Western Massachusetts
Nancy Campbell Patteson, Status of Women Council, UMass Amherst
Gloria Torres, Springfield Women's Commission
Lebonely Witherspoon, H.S.C.

Opening Remarks

Welcome and Introduction by Chair of the Commission, Susana Segat

Ms. Segat welcomed everyone to the Commission's first public hearing. After giving an overview of the Commission, its history, and its mission, Ms. Segat introduced the Commissioners and staff in attendance. Ms. Segat closed her remarks by outlining the agenda for the evening.

Welcome by Senator Linda Melconian

Senator Melconian welcomed the audience and Commission to the public hearing. She expressed the importance of hearing voices of women and girls in Western Massachusetts. In the past ten years, Senator Melconian explained, much legislation has been passed in Massachusetts that raises awareness of and offers solutions for important women's issues such as: violence against women, stalking, gender bias in courts, and harassment. Ten years later, however, there are new issues that need to be addressed by policy and legislation. Some of the issues the Senator mentioned are: the large income gap between men and women, disproportionate number of women in elected office and on boards, juggling work and home responsibilities, health care, bias in genetics testing, access to FDA-approved birth control, and gender bias in insurance. In conclusion Senator Melconian underscored the need for continued work on these and other women's issues, and her commitment to this effort.

Introduction of Ground Rules by Brenda Lopez, Facilitator

Ms. Lopez explained that the testimonies would be heard in the order people signed in at the registration desk. Each person would have two minutes for her or his testimony. There are also other ways to let your voice be heard, Ms. Lopez explained, such as submitting written testimony in the box at the registration desk or adding comments on post-it notes to the Issue Boards in the back of the room.

Summary of Testimony

*Summaries based on: note-takers' notes from the meeting,
staff listening to the audiocassette recording of the testimony,
and written testimony.*

Laurie Estes

Girl Scouts of Western Massachusetts

Ms. Estes is part of the newly-formed Western Massachusetts Girls' Coalition, which represents girls from throughout the Berkshire, Franklin, Hampshire, and Hampden Counties. She expressed the Coalition's hope that the Massachusetts Commission on the Status of Women will strongly represent the needs of girls.

Ms. Estes cited the recent Tri-County Girls' Needs Assessment Report, conducted by Market Street Research, Inc., which assessed the comprehensive needs of girls ages 5 to 19 in Franklin, Hampden, and Hampshire Counties. This report indicates that Western Massachusetts girls have unmet needs in a variety of areas such as: lack of programming in general, problems with access to programs, problems stemming from poverty, and problems agencies have in funding programs for girls. The report also determined that many organizations offer programming for girls, but often the emphasis is on older girls who are already in trouble, with insufficient programming for younger girls, and without enough emphasis on prevention.

The Girls' Coalition seeks the support and partnership of the Commission on Women in the following ways:

1. Ensuring inclusion of the needs of girls and young women in the work to which the Commission endeavors;
2. Providing regional workshops on political advocacy and legislative issues for women and girls; and
3. Assisting the Western Massachusetts Girls' Coalition as they develop and expand by identifying and advocating for resources in pursuit of their mission.

Written testimony on file.

Carla Halpern

Legal Assistance Corporation of Central Massachusetts

Ms. Halpern specializes in domestic violence and represents battered women in court. She is concerned about domestic violence and how it affects women in court cases. She specifically cited the great fear that women experience when going to court, especially regarding financial detriment, homelessness, or losing children due to domestic violence.

Ms. Halpern suggests three things to alleviate these fears and very real problems associated with domestic violence and court cases:

1. Change the image of abusers and the image of abuse. The general public and people involved in the legal process may think of abusers as monsters, but often abusers are actually suave, calm, sophisticated, and likable people. People think of abuse and they

think of just physical violence, but abuse is a lot more complicated and cyclical than that.

2. Recognize the financial consequences of abuse. The abuser is often the breadwinner and women may find themselves without financial resources or even homeless. Also, because of men's financial advantage over women, men may be able to hire private lawyers to represent their interests whereas women may not be able to do so.
3. Educate all people who are involved in court and judicial system as well as: Department of Revenue, police, investigators through the Department of Social Services, and the Department of Transitional Assistance.

Ms. Halpern is willing to work with the Commission on these issues.

Written testimony on file.

Mary Lou Bouley

President, League of Women Voters of the Northampton Area

Ms. Bouley came to talk about gender equity and neutrality in insurance policies. She outlined the history behind S. 2043, which stems from the Massachusetts Equal Rights Amendment, ratified in 1976. A change in the law is now necessary to end discrimination in life insurance policies. Discrimination in insurance policies based on religion and race was outlawed years ago, it is time to eliminate discrimination based on gender. This bill will enable women to buy the same benefits at the same price as men do in health, disability, life, and annuity policies. The bill is in the House currently; it has already passed in the Senate. Generally speaking, Ms. Bouley concluded, you get what you pay for, and women should be able to buy policies that give them the benefits they expect. Even more important: No one should pay more and get less.

Written testimony on file.

Maryann K. Brunton

Massachusetts Commission Against Discrimination

Ms. Brunton, on behalf of the MCAD welcomed the much-needed Commission on the Status of Women into the Commonwealth. She hopes that the Commission will work to combat discrimination in the workplace, housing, education, and in places of public accommodation. Ms. Brunton shared statistics about the kinds of discrimination against women that are occurring in Western Massachusetts. In sum, the Springfield MCAD office (which has jurisdiction over Worcester County and the four counties of Western Massachusetts) received more charges of discrimination based on gender than any other protected category. Also, at the Springfield MCAD office in the first quarter of 2000, 62% of the charges were filed by women whereas only 38% were filed by men. However, Ms. Brunton feels that this number still under-represents the number of women who have been discriminated against because women often fear retaliation by men and therefore do not file charges.

Ms. Brunton sees some egregious charges in her work as a compliance officer for the MCAD. She cited some of the issues these charges address but also pointed out that regrettably some charges are against women as perpetrators. This is a significant concern to the MCAD. Ms. Brunton ended her remarks by asking, What can be done? She

suggested that the MCAD and the Commission on the Status of Women work together: to educate the community, educators, government, and businesses about civil rights laws; to reach out for community involvement and support; and to support those people who face unlawful discrimination.

Written testimony on file.

Mary McRae

YWCA of Western Massachusetts

Ms. McRae is part of the newly-formed Western Massachusetts Girls' Coalition, which represents girls from throughout the Berkshire, Franklin, Hampshire, and Hampden Counties. The Girls' Coalition formed as a result of the Tri-County Girls' Needs Assessment Report. (See the summary of Laurie Estes' testimony for more information on this report.)

Ms. McRae pointed out that girls' issues are different from women's issues, but fall into each of the identified concerns as outlined by the Commission's mission statement. The Girls' Coalition believes that these issues are often overlooked or lumped in with women's issues. The Coalition wants the Commission to bring girls' issues to the front and center both as a response to girls' situations—for example hunger, violence, and homelessness—and as a preventative to future issues.

To this end, the Coalition asked the Commission to:

- Study, review and report on the state of women and girls in the Commonwealth;
- Inform leaders of business, education, health care, state and local governments and the communications media of issues pertaining to women and girls;
- Serve as a clearinghouse for information on issues pertaining to women and girls;
- Identify and recommend qualified women for appointive positions at all levels of government, including boards and commissions to provide workshops on advocacy, running for office, and legislative issues for women and girls, and in identifying and recommending qualified women to include advocates for girls;
- Promote and facilitate collaboration among local women's commissions and among women's organizations in the state and among girls' organizations including the Western Massachusetts Girls' Coalition and the Girls' Coalition of Greater Boston and other girls' coalitions; and
- As the Western Massachusetts Girls' Coalition begins to expand and develop, to assist in identifying and advocating for resources, both fiscal and specific programming.

Nancy Campbell Patteson

Status of Women Council, Faculty Senate Subcommittee at University of Massachusetts, Amherst

Ms. Patteson primarily had questions for the Commissioners regarding the structure, reporting line, and procedural plan of the Commission. Specifically: "How is the Commission structured?", "Who does the Commission report to?", "How does the

Commission plan to deal with the feedback they are gathering at the public hearings?”, and “What sort of funding does the Commission have?” The Status of Women Council on which Ms. Patteson sits at UMass Amherst has similar questions about the way women’s issues will be addressed at the university. Chair of the Commission, Susana Segat, addressed Ms. Patteson’s questions and explained the organizational structure of the Commission. Commissioners Beth Boland and Barbara Gomes-Beach talked about the Commission’s plan for the feedback received at the public hearings. The Chair explained the Commission’s funding.

Commissioner Clare Higgins asked Ms. Patteson to talk about some of the issues she sees at UMass Amherst. Ms. Patteson mentioned sexual harassment, gender curriculum, student perception of gender bias in the classroom, and leadership issues.

Sherry Duchesne

Hampden Hampshire County Housing Partnership for Family Self-Sufficiency

Ms. Duchesne is the Family Self-Sufficiency Specialist for the Rental Assistance Program at HAP. She works with individuals on their long-term goal planning (sometimes as long as 5 years) for economic self-sufficiency. When the participants come into the program they receive an escrow account as well as advocacy. There are currently 87 women in the project. Since the program began in 1995 there have been five graduates, three of whom purchased homes. Ms. Duchesne explained that the dilemma for the program is that welfare reform was not in place five years ago when the program was created, so at that point long-term goal-planning was achievable. However, now the program is trying to accomplish long-term goals within a two-year time limit. This poses challenges for Ms. Duchesne as she tries to help the participants reach their goals, especially in regard to higher education, which is limited by welfare regulations. Ms. Duchesne’s question for the Commission was: “Are there any exemptions for women involved in this program (and women’s programs like this)?” Her hope is that we can do something legislatively to counteract welfare reform to better enable women and their families to become economically self-sufficient.

Kerry Homstead

YWCA of Western Massachusetts

Ms. Homstead is concerned about the new two-year time limit for welfare and the restrictions it imposes on women’s ability to get scholarships, enter and complete assistance programs, and receive services. She sees women entering the workforce who are ill-equipped to perform their jobs in fields that are vital—like healthcare. She sees this as a problem that generates long-term poverty.

Ms. Homstead is aware of various studies about welfare done by different sectors, each of which presents welfare reform in a different light, depending on the perspective. She would like to see the Commission on Women put the studies together and look at the big picture. She is also concerned about housing issues and diversity.

Additional Written Testimony

Lois Pulliam

American Association of University Women

Ms. Pulliam submitted written testimony after the hearing in support of S. 2043, An Act Prohibiting Discrimination in Insurance Policies. Ms. Pulliam expressed the AAUW's support of this bill and urges the Commission to add their support.

Issue Boards

Participants were invited to write anonymous comments on post-it notes and stick them to the appropriate Issue Board during the hearing. The topics covered by the Issue Boards were: Health Care, Child Care, Girls' Issues, Violence Against Women, Economic Development/Stability, and Other.



Health Care

- ⇒ Low wages, no insurance. What is current access?

Girls' Issues

- ⇒ Repeal of the “parental consent” law which can have disastrous consequences for minors seeking abortions
- ⇒ Comprehensive, reality-based sexuality education (real education, not “abstinence only”)
- ⇒ League of Women Voters could help in political advocacy training for girls and women as per Girl Scouts recommendation

Violence Against Women

- ⇒ Effective self-defense training which is not too costly. Right now, most effective classes cost several hundred dollars.
- ⇒ Education of judges, court, investigators, police, DTA, DOR, DSS, probation officers, counselors, guardians-ad-litem, etc. on the reality and nature of domestic violence

Other

- ⇒ Reproductive freedom, including safe, accessible, affordable abortion, contraception, and pre-natal care
- ⇒ Appreciate support for Gender Neutral Insurance S. 2043
- ⇒ What is the impact of welfare reform on women, their education, stability and poverty? Can you bring together data that has been generated by different groups?